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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TALLINN 000292

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/12/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [IZ](#) [EN](#)  
SUBJECT: Estonian FM Paet Visit to Baghdad

Classified by: DCM Karen Decker for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

REF: (A) TALLINN 228

11. (C) SUMMARY: Ambassador Crocker and Iraqi officials told Estonian Foreign Minister Paet August 12 that Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) negotiations are ongoing and there is no guarantee they will conclude before Estonia's legislative mandate for operations in Iraq expires in December. Without a SOFA agreement or a new UN Security Council resolution on Iraq in place this fall, Estonian politicians will have to make a political decision on what the basis for Estonia's continued operations in Iraq will be. The GOE did not get any real public opinion ?bump? from the Foreign Minister's trip as local media coverage of Paet's trip to Baghdad was completely overshadowed by events in Georgia. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Foreign Minister Urmas Paet visited Iraq August 11-12 to discuss Estonia's continued participation in Operation Iraq Freedom (OIF). Paet was accompanied by Members of Parliament Sven Mikser (coalition) and Kadri Simson (opposition), advisors from the MFA and representatives of the Estonian media. On the first day of the trip, Paet visited with Estonian troops in Taji (25km northeast of Baghdad's center) and met Gen Lefebvre, Deputy Commanding General, MNC-I. The second day, in Baghdad, Paet met with Deputy PM Barham Salih, Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari and U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker.

13. (C) Arti Hilpus, MFA Director for Security Policy (who accompanied FM Paet on the trip) told Pol/Econ Chief Aug 18 the Minister had two primary objectives for his trip:

-- To find out the status of U.S.- Iraq negotiations on a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and determine whether the GOI will allow third countries to opt into the SOFA;

-- To get a clear and public indication from the GOI that it wants Estonia to continue participating in coalition operations in Iraq in 2009.

14. (C) While the Foreign Minister's trip created a "positive backdrop" for domestic discussions on Estonia's continued participation in OIF, Hilpus said, it did not give the GOE everything it had hoped for. The GOE still needs to determine what the legal framework will be for continued deployment. (Note: The current mandate, which is predicated on UNSCR 1151, will expire at the end of December. (See Ref A) The MFA and MOD have to prepare new legislation this fall for Cabinet and then parliamentary approval. End Note.)

15. (C) During his meeting with FM Zebari, FM Paet invited his counterpart to visit Estonia in the fall. Such a visit, Hilpus noted, could include a speech by Zebari to the Estonian parliament. This would help the GOE make its case for extension to both politicians and the Estonian public. Paet also asked Zebari if the GOI would send a written request for Estonian troops to stay in Iraq. FM Zebari responded positively to both requests - although he did not commit to any specific details. Zebari said a visit to Tallinn would be "a good opportunity to strengthen bilateral relations." He also told Paet he believed the GOI would be willing to send a letter requesting continued Estonian support. "We are ready to do what is necessary" Zebari said, "you have helped us very much."

16. (C) Hilpus expressed appreciation for Ambassador Crocker's candid briefing on the status of SOFA negotiations. Ambassador Crocker told Paet that he could not say with certainty that there will be an agreement in place by December. USG-GOI SOFA talks are "ongoing" and "intensive" and the two sides won't have an agreement until "everything is agreed." The Estonian side was pleased to hear that the version of the agreement currently under discussion includes a clause that would allow the SOFA to be extended to third countries like Estonia.

17. (C) The message from the GOI on the SOFA was similar. FM Zebari told Paet that the USG and GOI are "very close" and the agreement is "almost ready." However, Zebari noted, the Iraqi Parliament will also have to approve the SOFA and it is on vacation until the beginning of

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September. If there is a problem completing the SOFA this year, Zebari said, then Iraq will consider requesting another UN Security Council resolution. Zebari also told Paet that the GOI has not decided if it will agree to allow third countries to opt into the U.S.-Iraq SOFA or if it will insist each country negotiate its own bilateral agreement. According to Hilpus, if the GOI insists on individual SOFAs it will be impossible for Estonia and Iraq to finalize an agreement before Estonia's mandate in Iraq expires.

18. (C) Looking ahead at the legislative process, Hilpus said the undetermined status of the SOFA agreement is going to make it difficult for the GOE to draft its own legislation this fall. The Foreign Minister has been clear, Hilpus noted, that Estonia's mission in Iraq should continue as long as it is necessary. However, without an agreed SOFA or a UNSC Resolution in place, the GOE does not have a legal basis for extension of its Iraq mission. There will have to be a "political decision" by the Ministers on how to proceed, Hilpus said.

19. (C) Iraqi officials also conveyed their position on timelines for withdrawal of coalition forces. According to Hilpus, GOI officials made clear they want to take over as much responsibility for Iraqi security as possible. Iraq wants to demonstrate its sovereign status, Hilpus said. GOI interlocutors expressed their interest in reducing the "general numbers of the coalition," but also acknowledged coalition assistance to Iraq is still necessary. FM Zebari explained the United States and Iraq are talking about "time horizons" for withdrawal, but also noted that the security condition in Iraq should be the decisive factor in determining when withdrawal will occur. Iraq does not want to see a "security vacuum."

110. (C) Pol/econ Chief spoke separately with Center Party MP Kadri Simson, one of two MPs that had traveled with the Foreign Minister. (Note: Center Party is the largest opposition party in Estonia and Simson is the Deputy Chair of the Parliament's Defense Committee. End Note.) According to Simson, it was clear that FM Zebari does not believe the Iraqi Parliament will ratify the SOFA and that

the GOI thinks it will be easier to get a new UNSCR than to reach agreement domestically on the SOFA. Simson also highlighted the importance of USG and GOI discussions on a withdrawal horizon for coalition forces and noted that "most EU countries have left or are leaving" Iraq. The GOE needs to provide dates when Estonian soldiers will leave, Simson said. Looking ahead to the fall, Simson confirmed that Center Party has already decided it will vote against extending the Iraq mission when it comes to a vote in the Parliament. However, Simson noted, the vote is "symbolic" because the Government coalition has the votes it needs to extend the Iraq mandate.

¶11. (C) FM Paet was accompanied throughout his trip by a journalist and a cameraman from Estonian TV as well as journalists from Estonia's two largest circulation Estonian-language newspapers. In addition, the MFA released several press releases during and after the trip. However, there was little coverage of the trip as the crisis in Georgia has dominated Estonian news since August 7th.

¶12. (C) Comment: Post is grateful to Embassy Baghdad colleagues for facilitating this visit, which constitutes an important step toward extending the Estonian mandate for the Iraq mission. In the aftermath of the Foreign Minister's trip, it is all the more imperative that we continue to work closely with the Government of Estonia on this issue. We therefore reiterate reftel request that Washington send State and Pentagon operational experts to Tallinn as soon as possible for detailed technical discussions on the SOFA. Visits by senior-level officials or members of Congress would also help the GOE's efforts to work Parliament and public opinion on the need for continued Estonian participation in Iraq. End Comment.

PHILLIPS